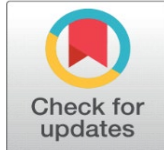
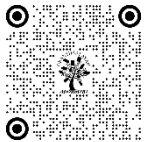


# UNVEILING SELF: IDENTITY IN AMY TAN'S THE CHINESE SIAMESE CAT

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## ABSTRACT

Amy Tan's *The Chinese Siamese Cat* examines the exploration of identity. Through the narrative of a Siamese cat explaining the changing colour of her kittens' fur as they age, Tan delves into themes of self-recognition and cultural identity. The story, set against the backdrop of a classic Chinese folktale, serves as an allegory for broader socio-cultural dynamics. This analysis highlights how Tan uses the Siamese cat's journey to reflect on issues of ethnic, gender, and cultural identity, aligning with Marxist perspectives on class struggle and social categorization. The examination reveals how the quest for personal identity intertwines with societal structures, offering insights into the challenges of self-definition amidst varying social expectations and power dynamics.

**Keywords:** Identity, Issues of Ethnicity, Gender, Cultural Identity, Marxist Theory and Power Struggle

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*The Chinese Siamese Cat* marks Tan's second venture into children's literature. Illustrated by Gretchen Schields, it was first released by Simon and Schuster Children's Publishing Division in New York in 1994 and later reissued by Aladdin Paperbacks in 2001. The story was subsequently adapted into an animated series that aired on PBS Kids in the USA. Critic Sheng-Mei Ma describes the book as reflecting "the chinoiserie tradition and ethnic stereotypes of Chinese" (Ma 1998). The series earned accolades including the Parents' Choice Award and the Best Television Program for Children Award.

The story starts with a Siamese cat explaining to her kittens why their faces, ears, paws, and tails darken as they grow older. It explores how the Siamese cat comes to recognize the significance of being called Siamese. A key Marxist theme in this children's tale is the quest for identity, which encompasses social classifications such as ethnicity, gender, religion, culture, age, and more. The narrative also touches on societal class divisions based on resources, production methods, wealth accumulation, and power struggles.

Tan emphasizes the significance of names, highlighting their social influence and the legacy they convey within a community. A name serves as both a legal identifier linked to one's biological or social heritage and a means of defining and categorizing oneself in society. Ming Miao's enthusiastic explanation of how she named her kittens ironically reflects

the economic and social standing of a person. She remarked, "Before you go out into the world," she said, "you must know the true story of your ancestors" (Tan 1994).

Defining a person's identity is akin to establishing their position in society, often described as finding one's place or niche. A person's manner of speaking can reveal their economic standing. Identity itself is both a self-recognition and an external acknowledgement, characterized by distinct tastes, values, attitudes, and lifestyles. Ming Miao reveals to her kittens the "story of their great ancestor, Sagwa of China" (Tan 1994). She explains, "The truth is," Ming Miao began,

you are not Siamese cats but Chinese cats. As a matter of fact, one of your family's ancestors from a thousand cats lived long ago was the famous feline Sagwa of China. She's the reason your face, ears, paws, and tails will turn darker and darker. She's the reason I taught you to say politely in Chinese miao-miao-miao instead of mee-yow-OW, the cranky way Siamese cats do when they cry for their food (Tan 1994).

Marx argues that in a society, class distinctions and structures are primarily determined by (i) work and labour relations, and (ii) ownership or control of property and the means of production. In a capitalist system, these economic dimensions shape social relationships. Unlike earlier societies, which had various strata or elite groups such as priests, knights, or military leaders, these were not exclusively defined by economic factors. Gramsci highlights this point by stating:

The working class can only become the leading and the dominant [hegemonic] class to the extent that it succeeds in creating a system of class alliances which allows it to mobilize the majority of the working population against capitalism and the bourgeois State.

Cultural Studies states that politics and power are interconnected; they define and reinforce each other. The Magistrate exemplifies a figure driven by financial gain, aiming to extract wealth from both people and animals. He also represents cultural and social authority, exerting control over everything in his domain, including the animals. As illustrated "he had discovered that the pointy-tipped tails of cat made very fine writing brushes. That's what the Magistrate used for writing his silly rules: the tails of Mama Miao and Baba Miao" (Tan 1994). The Magistrate enacted rules solely for his benefit,

made up rules that helped only him. Because he wanted to command respect, he ordered people and animals to bow down to him. Because he was afraid that people laughed at him behind his back, he made a rule that people could no longer laugh. Because he wanted more money, he charged people fines for breaking his rules (Tan 1994).

This situation represents a conflict between two competing powers. As Marx and Engels note,

A struggle between two great classes of society necessarily becomes a political struggle... In every struggle of class against class, the next end fought for is political power; the ruling class defends its political supremacy, that is to say, its safe majority in the Legislature; the inferior class fights for, first a share, then the whole of that (Marx & Engels 1967).

The Magistrate creates and enforces rules not to promote societal harmony but to exploit them for personal financial gain. He represents a capitalist figure who controls the means of production and wields power to pursue his interests, often at the expense of ordinary individuals.

In this short story, power functions not only as a mechanism for controlling the masses but also as a lens through which cultural practices and beliefs are interpreted. Tan illustrates that the Magistrate is part of the dominant group that oversees and oppresses the less powerful lower class. He embodies the bourgeoisie, responsible for creating and enforcing rules. The dynamic between the Magistrate and the people mirrors the relationship between the economy and culture. In this context, the economic base or mode of production shapes the social, political, and cultural processes affecting ordinary individuals, influencing both the base and the superstructure. "And now," he added, "here are the names of those who broke the rule today!" And it was Mama Miao's turn to write down the names of those people who didn't yet know there was a rule against singing" (Tan 1994).

Mama Miao must work diligently to navigate life in the Magistrate's household, regardless of the arbitrary rules he establishes to exert control. As kitten Sagwa observes,

since the Magistrate had made so many rules, people had to pay him many fines, which is why he had a lot of money, which is why his house grew to have many lavish rooms and courtyards. Which is why there were many places that little kittens could explore and where they could get themselves into many kinds of trouble" (Tan 1994).

The Magistrate wields both social and economic power, shaping and influencing those under his authority. In every aspect of life, the Magistrate seeks to profit. He employs the cattails to draft new regulations, knowing their curved shape

makes them ideal for brushes, “the tails of Mama Miao and Baba Miao. He dipped them into a pot of lampblack Chinese ink, the kind of ink that doesn’t wash off” (Tan 1994). Through his rules, the Magistrate has managed to organize and control the proletariat. His actions are driven by a keen sense of profit. Understanding that singing and dancing could distract people from their duties, he decrees that they must refrain from singing until sunset. As Longhurst et al. (2011) note, “another aspect of its power to shape and control the state is the cultural control exercised by the bourgeoisie.” Consequently, people are compelled to adhere to the Magistrate’s directives and regulations.

Sagwa’s dread of the consequences for her mother and father reveals her fear of the Magistrate’s house. The passage illustrates the dire consequences the family might face without food and comfort. The Magistrate’s transformation from a profit-driven individual to someone who appears more emotionally invested can also be seen as a strategy to gain social recognition and prestige. This aligns with the capitalist’s primary goal of achieving societal status and acclaim.

If the Magistrate saw her covered in ink, he would know what she had done. He would likely have her parents punished severely for raising such a troublesome kitten. He might even expel the kittens from the house, leaving them to face the harsh reality of homeless life, where they might have to scavenge for food. She had heard grim tales of stray kittens forced to hunt flies for their meals. Her entire family would suffer, and she would be blamed. Overcome with terror and shame, Sagwa hid behind the Magistrate’s dragon chair, awaiting the worst. We will be thrown to the dogs, she miaowed to herself (Tan 1994).

Thus, it can be concluded that Tan effectively highlights class struggle and power dynamics in this short story. She presents power as a means of control and identity, illustrating how economic and social power contributes to widening the inequalities between different societal classes. The Chinese Siamese Cat depicts the conflict between class struggle and class privilege.

## **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

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